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ABSTRACT

Authors of texts for instruction in English as a second language have several options for publishing: the traditinal method, dealing directly with large, well-known publishers, or with smaller, specialized houses, or with author-formed groups. This process begins with an idea, and involves making contacts and submitting proposals, review and revision, a contract, manuscript completion, editing, printing, marketing, and the receipt of royalties. Other possible publishing options include self-publishing, a respectable method that includes both author control and author responsibility for costs and distribution; subsidy publishing by "vanity presses" that offer limited editorial assistance; and publication by book packagers that provide a variety of services to both authors and publishers, particularly editorial services. In all cases, it is essential for the author to protect his or her interests by being informed about the legal and financial considerations of each option and contractual agreement. (MSE)

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THE REALITY OF ESL PUBLISHING: AN AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW

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Seeing one's name in print on an ESL text series can be exciting and ego-gratifying, and there are other advantages to publication as well. But the process is neither short nor simple, and rarely does it correspond to the fantasy. The following article outlines the traditional publishing process--the steps involved in carrying a concept through to the marketing of bound books--and describes several alternative publishing routes. It offers potential authors some of the nitty-gritty information necessary to avoid costly mistakes and to make educated publishing choices.

Perhaps you have an idea for an ESL/EFL book that has never been written before but would "revolutionize the field." Or you have years and years of classroom materials that would "make a great text." You show the fruits of your genius to a publisher, the company enthusiastically offers you an attractive contract, you submit a manuscript which soon appears at a TESOL conference as the most noticeable book ever, and you--on your way to your world-wide speaking speaking tour--ride off to the bank with bags of money collected from royalties.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? But realistic? Well...perhaps there are a few details missing.

Most ESL authors are classroom teachers or professors with

This paper is a summary of information presented at a workshop of the same name, at CATESOL '84 in San Jose, at the Los Angeles and Ventura County mini-conferences (fall '84), and at TESOL '85 in San Diego.

Elaine Kirn, now at Santa Monica College, has taught ESL, foreign languages, and special education in schools in Los Angeles and in Germany. Her textbook publications include All Spelled Out (Prentice-Hall, 1981), the Regents Illustrated Classics Series (Regents, 1982), Scenario (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1984), and Interactions (Random House, 1985). She has been involved in various capacities in all phases of the publishing process.

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years of practical experience which we translate into a "product"--a book or series, along with ancillaries such as teachers' manuals and tapes, to be used as classroom or lab materials or for teacher reference. We create ESL materials for a variety of reasons: although some of us are simply filling our productive time while waiting for our great break in novel writing, most seem to actually enjoy the process of creating educational materials. We write for our students--to fill the gap left by books that don't quite take care of their language needs; we write for the field--to present new ways of teaching and learning, or creative ways of applying tried-and-true methods; and we write for ourselves--to express ideas and see our names and creations in print.

And after our first books are published, we keep writing. Not that the initial experience is a literary picnic--there are the low points: the review cycles and the numerous revisions--and more revisions--insisted upon by the publisher or by our own sense of perfection. There are perhaps the disagreements with editors and the miscommunications with artists or designers. There are the delays in publication, the waiting...the endless waiting,.... And yet, we finally see our books advertised in colorful catalogs, and teachers smilingly compliment us on our work, and the product is selling. Is it all worth the effort? Well...can we talk? About reality?

The Traditional Publishing Route

In a small field such as ESL, most writers deal directly with publishers--the large "name" houses that produce educational materials for many fields and trade books for the general public, the smaller companies that may specialize in a few areas or concentrate on a lower number of publications in several fields, and the author-formed groups cooperating to produce unique classroom materials at low cost. Each type of publisher and the individual companies offer different advantages and disadvantages; the process of publication, however, regardless of the chosen house, usually follows these steps:

1. Most books begin with a potential author and an idea. And here--already--begins a cycle that can be maintained only through the well-known characteristic of "writer's drive and self-discipline." We prepare proposals--descriptions of the purpose, theoretical rationale, scope and sequence, organization, and saleable features of our proposed projects; the best proposals focus on marketability and competition. In addition, there must be a sample of one or more chapters--a typical example of the style, tone, and content of the book.

2. After making contact through conventions, mail, or by phone, authors submit their proposals to one or more publishers. Then we wait. And wait.... A typical acquisitions editor, especially one with many manuscripts passing over his or her desk, may take

from weeks to a year to decide to support or to reject a particular project. The decision-making process usually involves reviews--the written opinions of experts in the field and knowledgeable classroom teachers as to the marketability, pedagogical accuracy and effectiveness, and attractiveness of the submitted proposal and sample. The publication effort might end after receipt of these reviews with a "Dear Author" letter and the return of the materials. Before making a decision, however, some houses may request revision according to reviewers' suggestions--one or more times. The decision process, ultimately based on a myriad of economic considerations, can end with rejection at any point.

3. At some time in the review and revision process, one or more publishers might decide to acquire a manuscript and offer a contract. Although similar in many points, contracts can differ in important ways--notably in the offered royalty (percentage of net sales) and the amount of advances, money which authors receive up front but which is then deducted from future royalties. Proven authors generally get better terms than beginning ones; there are not set rules, but ESL textbook royalties seem to range from about 7-1/2% to 12%. Besides percentages, however, other factors can contribute to the attractiveness of a particular publishing house: the size and organization of the sales staff; the number, type, and quality of other books on the publisher's list, the integrity of the staff, and so on. Experienced writers as well as beginners often find professional advice--both business and legal--useful at this point.

4. Next begins the bulk of our actual work. Because of advertising and sales schedules, publishers often insist on authors meeting deadlines for manuscript completion; this time pressure generally works to our benefit as well since we are interested in offering our published work to the ESL community as soon as possible. The writing process may proceed in stages and always involves input from one or more editors and additional reviewers. Most experienced writers seem to need several months for completion of a short, simple book and up to a year or more for a major text, including "research and inspiration time," as well as time needed for revisions. A new writer may take considerably longer.

5. An infamous part of most authors' contracts, often called the "satisfactory in form and content" clause, gives the publisher the right to reject manuscripts at any point for any "good faith" reason, such as evidence of poor writing or the necessity for considerable additional editing. In most cases, however, if the writing and editing proceeds smoothly, the major part of an author's work ends with the publisher's acceptance of a "production-ready" manuscript. A production team, usually directed by an editorial manager, takes over for artwork, design, typesetting, proofreading, layout, and the numerous other tasks

that are part of the production process, which can take from a few months to a year or more. This stage of publication ends with the production of camera-ready copy, or boards, or film to be used in manufacture.

6. The manufacture of actual books can take from weeks to months. Finally, authors receive complimentary copies of their finished work, often our first indication that the books are on the market and ready to be sold.

7. Although our participation varies with the publisher, we may then become involved in the actual marketing of the book. All authors are asked to help educate the sales departments with editorial information; some help out at conventions and/or give commercial presentations to potential customers.

8. Royalty statements are sent to authors twice a year; as soon as our advances are recouped, we receive checks as well, hopefully in amounts that can eventually justify the amount of time and effort we put into the projects. There will probably be several reprints. In the field of ESL, there may or may not be subsequent revisions of the work, which authors have the right to complete. Low-selling books usually disappear after a few years, while popular ones can stay around for decades.

The above is only a skeletal outline of the major steps in traditional textbook publishing. There are, of course, many details in each stage and many problems which can come up at any time. Some writers who do not want to go through the process on their own prefer to participate in publisher-initiated projects. In these carefully-planned series, a project editor takes over the responsibility of initial inspiration and coordination, directing authors on their particular books or portions of books. Royalty percentages may be slightly lower in this case than in author-initiated projects, or publishers may offer writers fees for their participation in place of royalties. There are, in addition, other ways of publishing ESL projects.

Other Possible Routes: Self-Publishing, Subsidy Publishing and Book Packaging.

SELF-PUBLISHING is a respectable route to book creation which offers the advantage of control: authors have complete decision-making authority over the contents of the work, as well as the power to approve or disapprove art, design, typestyle, and the like. We then own and have full rights to the product; in addition to being able to sell it when, where, and in whatever way we like, we receive all proceeds from sales.

Unfortunately, with full control comes also full responsibilty: as in all business ventures, financial profit is simply the difference between receipts and expenses.

Self-published writers have not only the expense of our writing time to consider; we must also pay for all production and for manufacture, personally deal with mistakes and services not up to expectation, and--most of all--take responsibility for advertising and distribution of the work. Of course, after recovery of expenses (if ever), self-publishers receive much more per sale than authors whose work is published by others. If we want more than just personal satisfaction from our publication efforts, we must make the same decisions that publishing houses confront when considering every new project: How many copies is the product likely to sell? What is the relationship between projected sales and estimated production, manufacture, and distribution costs? These are questions that, even after considerable market research, can receive only speculative answers. Self-publishers take all the risk.

SUBSIDY PUBLISHERS offer a little more help. "Are you an author in search of a publisher?" Perhaps you have seen their ads or brochures offering manuscript appraisal, editing, production, promotion, and marketing. Unflatteringly known as "vanity presses," these organizations, which appeal generally to writers of trade fiction (poetry and novels) who above all want their work in print, will produce a passable book from a manuscript for a price--usually a certain amount over what authors would pay for self-publishing directly with a production house or with freelancers. Subsidy publishers promise a certain amount of editorial help, although--since they make their money directly from charges to writers and do not have a stake in the sales--they are not likely to put much effort into improving the manuscript for the sake of marketability. Yet, if writers understand their terms and the limits of their services, subsidy publishers seem to be generally honest houses helping writers to publish for personal reasons. Authors generally receive about a 30% royalty on retail book sales. Unfortunately, particularly in specialized fields, these companies do not have the distribution network or staff to assure even minimal sales; furthermore, since any writer can publish a manuscript through a subsidy firm, the reputation of their trademark may hurt authors rather than help them.

BOOK PACKAGERS provide a variety of services to authors and publishers; there also seems to be a variety of definitions as to their functions. The key to book packaging, however, appears to be the offered editorial services. A book packager is probably of primary help to authors who are just beginning their careers; talented editors can help writers with "great ideas" to put their concepts into marketable form. They can turn imaginative classroom materials, written for personal purposes, into professional products with wider sales appeal.

Firms that offer only editorial services may be known as "project developers." These may be tied to a particular publisher and be obligated to that house for all manuscripts, or

they may be able to act as authors' "agents" in offering manuscripts to various publishing houses. In either case, they will examine manuscripts with the same eye to marketability as publishers themselves do, sending proposals and samples out for review and making decisions as to their money-making potential. One major advantage, however, is that book developers have the staff and inclination to work more closely with authors, if necessary, than the busy acquisitions or managing editors of large houses. In general, they will not reject proposals and samples merely because they are not submitted in polished form. Hopefully, they have the ability and the motivation to see potential in promising ideas and to share--or even take over--the worries involved in the frustrating process of submitting proposals, receiving rejections, and negotiating contracts with publishers.

In addition to editorial help, some packaging companies offer book production services. For both beginning and veteran authors, the experience of participating in production with a local packager, the opportunity to watch our ideas take concrete shape in illustrations and type, can be exciting. It can also substantially improve the quality of the final product, as well as the speed of production, since--if the production manager and team work well with writers--miscommunication and delays from long-distance correspondence can be reduced or eliminated. Although publishers usually have the final say over all product decisions, in book packaging authors are given the opportunity to participate as part of a team of producers, and our editorial input may carry considerable weight. On the other hand, writers should beware of packagers without the sufficient staff--specialists in ESL--to manage the editorial concerns in art, design, layout, and typeset. Although book production may seem like "fun" at first, most of us do not have the time to invest in its editorial management. If a book packaging arrangement includes production, it may be advantageous for writer to be <u>invited</u> to participate, the <u>obligation</u> to take part is not to our benefit.

How do book packagers earn their livings? By contrast to subsidy publishers, they do not require payments from authors for book production or manufacture. If the services which a packager offers publishers are attractive enough, it may even be able to get slightly better terms for writers than we could negotiate for ourselves (a higher royalty or advance). In general, however, authors will be working with a packager under terms similar to what we would get if we were working directly with the publisher, with the advantages mentioned above. A packaging firm makes its money from direct fees from the publisher for editing and production, or--in many cases--by sharing the risk with the author. In such instances, the firm will negotiate higher royalties for the "packaged product" than authors receive for the writing alone. It will pay for editing and production from company funds or finance its operation from publisher advances,

which then have to be paid back from its share of the royalties. This latter arrangement may be advantageous to authors because it motivates the packager to produce the highest quality product possible.

Making Educated Choices

As in all business, the human element in ESL publishing plays a vital role. Besides being based on financial information and speculation, many decisions inevitably boil down to the specifics of the people involved. Before committing to a close working relationship with any group or company, most authors need to feel confident in their editors, in particular, and in the entire production or publishing operation, including the sales staff. Information from other authors and former and present clients of the publisher, production house, or packager may prove enlightening; it is always helpful to ask for their names.

Most educational publishers and packagers of the types decribed above consist of reputable, honest businesspeople trying to make a reasonable living in an industry which offers a few rewards in addition to money. As in all business, however, there are also the misrepresentations, the overoptimistic promises and the confusing and contradicting half-truths, to beware of. One particular problem may be a substitution of terms--a subsidy publisher may present itself as a book packager, neglecting to mention or to explain clearly that in its ventures, production costs are indirectly paid for by authors, that is, that it operates as a "subsidy packager." This simple omission, however, can result in a huge financial difference; authors who put in from several months to several years writing time on any one book are assured of no financial receipts whatsoever. Unless the packager provides writers with considerable advances for the work, arranges a "pass-through" agreement with the publisher for immediate payment of authors' royalties, or agrees to pay authors out of its own funds until its production advances are recouped, writers may have to wait for several years after publication before receiving any money at all. In the case of books which do not stay in publication beyond four or five years, there may be no author's royalties.

All publishing, ESL no exception, is "risky business," and financial rewards rest ultimately on the quality of the product combined with the strength and ability of the sales effort. Before that point is reached, however, there is no reason to lose thousands of dollars or to waste thousands of hours out of sheer inexperience or misunderstandings. Especially if the terms of offered agreements from a publisher, producer, or packager do not seem clear, it is essential to seek business and legal advice. As in all business arrangements, authors must of course insist that all terms be clearly spelled out in writing so that later errors in communication can be avoided.

So you have a great idea for an ESL/EFL book? Is publishing really worth the effort? As in all decision-making, you will probably weigh the pros and cons of each alternative according to your individual situations. If products do not sell well, you may get little more for your efforts than personal satisfaction, professionally-produced classroom materials for your own use, and the compliments of your family and friends. On the other hand, there are always the best-selling books or series, the texts that appear in nearly every school across the country and internationally, the fun of being well-known, and....

Well, a lot of us are still writing.